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A QUESTION OF PREPAREDNESS

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Undoubtedly this is Martha's day. Her practical wisdom is the watch-cry of modern education. We teachers of English, with the rest of the world, are following in her footsteps, and all our talk is of efficiency, scientific method, and practical results. Nor should we cast a shade of reproach on useful Martha who is cumbered with so many cares in our behalf. But we cannot forget that it was said of Mary that she had chosen the better part. May it not be the better part for us also, occasionally, to sit at the feet of our inspiration and ask, not merely, "Am I making proper use of the oral method?" or "How many compositions can I red-ink in an hour?" but also, "What *is* this 'English' which is at once my joy and my despair? Am I by nature and training fitted to be its interpreter? How can I grow in power and understanding?"

Especially should these questions present themselves to the young teacher. I will confess at once that there is nothing in these pages for the seasoned English teacher in college or high school, but that I want to talk to the young teacher of English literature of two or three years' experience,

Happy in this she is not yet so old
But she may learn.

Are there any such who are wondering if indeed they are English teachers both born and made and if the making has been of the wisest and if some remaking would be an improvement?

We will suppose that you made a wise choice of home and parents and were properly brought up by a soft-voiced mother on *Mother Goose* and fairy tales and *Pilgrim's Progress* and King Arthur; that the grown-ups also knew a good book and a good picture and had a taste for a fine concert. There wasn't money enough in that home, let us hope, to encourage careless handling

of books or an extravagance in mechanical toys to the utter destruction of the childish imagination. Your little body grew strong and your nerves steady through being much in the great out-of-doors, where you learned the language of every bird and the unutterable love in the faces of the clouds.

In high school you had some strong work in composition and wise guidance along the pathway of great literature. But you often strayed from the prescribed pathway and lost yourself in fields afar where you met and loved Rob Roy and Effie Deans and the Covenanter, Peggoty, the Turveydrops, the Artful Dodger, Lorna Doone, Maggie Tulliver, wee Sir Gibbie, the Princess and Curdy, Elaine, Lynnette, and a hundred others who hold the place in your heart set aside for first loves.

And pray Heaven that you read all these books for love and *not*—for credit!

When the time came for you to go to college, you had about made up your mind to be an English teacher. How impatiently you hurried through your required work and began to specialize and to take every course in the English curriculum which the college schedule and human ingenuity could compass! Literary history in a general survey; special periods—the Elizabethan era, the Romantic movement, the age of Tennyson; courses on individual writers, devoting whole terms to Chaucer or Shakespeare or Wordsworth; courses in literary types—the epic, the lyric, the drama, “tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral”; courses in Early English, in Middle English, and in English “as she is spoke.”

After all this you were of course “prepared to teach English”! Yes, perhaps.

But isn't this a good time to stop a minute to ask what we mean by teaching English? Is it to teach mere poetry and prose or is it to interpret life and thought? Isn't such a specialized training rather narrow for one who must touch life at many points, to whom nothing human can be alien? Suppose we plan a little differently for the training of the high-school teacher.

We should by all means retain the historical survey and let it be a strong course, but not equally intensive in all its parts; we can

spare some of Donne and the conceitists for more of Wordsworth, and we can afford to emphasize Chaucer at the expense of Pope. Let us study, not alone for facts—for facts are accessible at our need—but for atmosphere and background to understand the social soil out of which literature springs.

One or two courses in special periods and individual authors are valuable that we may learn methods of intensive study. We should have some careful drill in prose style and something in the interpretation of lyric poetry. Two or three other courses to suit the personal taste would not be out of place. But I am firmly convinced that our candidates for English teaching need *fewer* courses in English rather than more, and a greater emphasis laid on work that will give background and significance and substance to the work in literature.

History, a great deal of it, is indispensable. Psychology, of course. Languages which acquaint us with other literatures than our own are invaluable. Greek, Latin, French, German, may widen our understanding of philosophy, of drama, of lyric, and give us an entirely fresh point of view.

But especially would I urge the English teacher not to neglect science. We English teachers are so likely to be seers of visions and dreamers of dreams that we need the careful discipline of accurate, definite study to give us solidity and steadiness. We must learn to organize our knowledge and to be loyal to the truth. Where can we learn this better than in the laboratory? *Martha* will see that we make the proper applications!

But whether your college training was this or that, here you are after a year or two's experience, drawing your salary, faithfully assigning and hearing lessons, everybody apparently contented, and yet yourself dissatisfied, even a bit unhappy, with a feeling that you are not adequately bringing the great message of poet and thinker to the hobbledehoy world of the schoolroom; that you are failing to be the live wire to carry the current which should touch the heart and will of impressionable boys and girls.

So you begin to feel about for means of improvement. Your more or less solid college acquirements do not seem so solid now. There is such a world to know about English literature that your

attainments become impressive by their meagerness, and you are on the point of deciding to take that few hundred dollars in the savings bank and go in pursuit of your A.M.—graduate study is the thing!

Has it occurred to you that what you need is not more courses in literature, but more courses in *living*? That an enlarged human experience is the only way of interpreting great literature so that its truths will be “carried alive into the heart by passion”? But you may ask me, “How can I enlarge my experience when I teach in a small country high school, am only twenty-five years old, and never have anything interesting happen to me?”

Let me suggest three ways in which our horizon may be broadened and our natures deepened—through books, through art, through travel.

First, by reading the best and biggest books. I mean books which we may or may not have gone through in our “assigned reading” at college, but which have not begun to discipline our minds and hearts as they will do if we let them have a real chance at us. Have we rested our troubled hearts in the bright, serene wisdom of Plato? Have we seen the perfect beauty of Homer, while our eyes are dim at Hector’s parting with Andromache and the little Astyanax:

So speaking, to the arms of his dear spouse
He gave the boy; she on her fragrant breast
Received him, weeping as she smiled. The chief
Beheld and, moved with tender pity, smoothed
Her forehead gently with his hand and said:
“Sorrow not thus, beloved one, for me;
No living man can send me to the shades
Before my time.”

Have we struggled with St. Augustine torn between a supersubtle intellect and a sick and tired heart? Have we gone step by step through searing flame and piercing cold with Dante and the stricken souls until we too cry out:

I wailed not, so of stone grew I within; they wailed.

Have we not merely “had a course” in Shakespeare and “taught” *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice*? Have we grappled

him to our soul with hoops of steel, have we worn him in our heart's core, aye, in our heart of hearts, until we also feel that—

All pains the immortal spirit must endure,
All weakness which impairs, all griefs which bow
Find their sole speech in that victorious brow.

This it seems to me is to read great books; and to enter vicariously into such experiences will make life always a bigger and finer thing.

Another door which opens into wide fields is the one called art. Inexpensive reproductions, a few fine photographs, and a good handbook will enable us to study painting and sculpture with real satisfaction, and we shall find a whole new world of beauty and power opening before us at the touch of the master's hand.

But suppose you are trying these plans. You are studying art in one way or another. You are trying to "keep up" your music, you are reading one or two of the great books each year—and that five or six hundred dollars is still burning your pocket—you must spend it in study. By all means, but this first time spend it in the study of literary backgrounds instead of in graduate courses. I truly think that it would be wiser for the Middle West teacher who has traveled little to postpone that winter at Chicago or Columbia and spend half of what that would cost in a summer trip through New England. You don't know until you have tried it how a first-hand knowledge of places and customs will bring life and zest to your teaching. Our best literature is full of sights and sounds strange to the Kansas or Nebraska boy or girl.

"The little brooks that run
O'er pebbles glancing in the sun."

"Mountains on whose barren breast
The laboring clouds do often rest."

"Old ocean's gray and melancholy waste."

How many of them realize that there are still hundreds of farms in New England where the mower whets his scythe to cut the hay crop, and Maud Muller rakes the meadows, and where the slow oxen are still the most reliable "horse-power"? Here is a quaint new world for you to enter and to which you may bring

those boys and girls in spirit! Take the trip out from Boston following the course of Paul Revere from the Old North Church along the stone-walled highway through Lexington to Concord, visit the bridge where the Minute Man keeps guard, and see how much more you will find for your boys in Emerson's splendid lines:

Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world.

Or starting out from Boston in the other direction, stop at Salem to see the House of Seven Gables and then keep on to that stern and rock-bound coast of Cape Ann where the *Hesperus* was wrecked on Norman's Woe. When you turn your face homeward, go through the White Mountains; and as your train carries you over high trestles and under the peaks of the Crawford Notch, gaze out at the mountain side where that avalanche carried off the Ambitious Guest and his circle of friends. Then take a flying trip to Irving's Sunnyside and Sleepy Hollow. If when you take up your work in September you are not truly refreshed in body and spirit and able to put more life and meaning into your English teaching, I'll agree to write no more advice to English teachers!

Then when this cruel war is over you will be eager to gain the same kind of inspiration from Mother England and quaint little Holland, from the castled Rhine and Italy, mother of art. When you have stood by Shakespeare's grave or walked in his footsteps "across the fields to Anne," when you have purified your soul by Grasmere Lake and Rydal water, when you have stood upon the Bridge of Sighs and wandered about the Coliseum by moonlight, when your solemnized spirit has knelt in that Protestant cemetery in Rome by the graves of Shelley and Keats, English poetry will take on a depth of meaning which it has not had for you before.

In these three ways, then—through familiar acquaintance with places associated with our great literature, through the ministry of art, and through the close companionship of great books—we can pursue those supplementary courses in living which will put new power into all our teaching.